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ABSTRACT

A study examined kindergartners' self-concepts and their perceptions of interactions with peers. Subjects were 345 kindergarten children from one socioeconomically mixed district. Children were asked to identify whether or not they perceived themselves to be part of the group and whether or not they wanted to be part of the group. Responses were analyzed in relationship to the child's self-concept, as determined by the Woolner Preschool Self-Concept Picture Test. Results indicated that most of the subjects exhibited high self-concepts, and typically perceived themselves as accepted by the group. As expected, children with low self-concepts tended to perceive themselves as rejected by peers, whereas those with high self-concepts tended to perceive themselves as accepted. An unexpected finding, however, was that low self-concept children were more likely to desire to be rejected by peers. Results are consistent with previous research indicating that self-concept does affect children's descriptions and perceptions of their interactions with peers. (Contains 33 references.) (HTH)

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Kindergartners' Self-Concepts and Perceptions of Peer Interactions

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Abstract

One's perception of self is related to one's perception of how others perceive the self. This study examined kindergartner's self-concept in relationship to views of their interactions with peers. Data were gathered across a two-year time span in a centralized kindergarten program. Teachers participated voluntarily. The Woolner Preschool Self-Concept Picture Test was used when interviewing the 345 participants. Results indicated that 88% of the participants scored a "high self-concept"; 12% scored low self-concepts.

One item of the Woolner's instrument asked students to choose between a picture that represents a child being a part of the group or a child separate from the group. Responses to this item were used to measure children's perceptions of their peer group interactions. Most children described themselves as accepted by the group (82.9%). Chi-square analyses suggest a strong relationship between self-concept and children's description of their peer interactions. This lends support to the relationship between self-concept and perceptions of interactions with peers.

Kindergartners' Self-Concepts and Perceptions of Peer Interactions

Changes in society and family have and will impact young children's growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1985; Elkind, 1984; Umansky, 1983). Although changes in family structures are evident, the needs of the children are primarily the same. The family serves as the primary socializing agent while the school serves as the secondary socializing agent for young children.

"Early childhood educators have traditionally given high priority to enhancing young children's social development" (McClellan & Katz, 1993, p. 2). Hartup (1992) suggested that peer relationships contribute significantly to both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which individuals function as adults. Because young children constantly gather information concerning their value as persons through their interactions with the significant adults and peers in their lives; home environments as well as school settings influence those perceptions (Kostelnik, Stein, & Whiren, 1988).

Self-concept is generally viewed as the attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that an individual has about himself or herself. Children often behave consistently with the way they perceive themselves (Marshall, 1989). In

addition, kindergartners describe themselves largely in terms of activities such as play (Damon & Hart, 1982). Young children's beliefs about their competence also influence the way in which they approach new situations. Their successfulness in new situations affects the way they perceive themselves-- in a seemingly circular process (Marsh, 1984). Marshall and Weinstein (1984) advocate that classroom structure and teachers' control orientations may influence children's self-concepts as well. Marshall (1989) suggested steps likely to enhance the self-concepts of young children are: 1) Help children feel that they are of value; 2) Help children feel that they are competent; 3) Help children feel that they have some control; 4) Help children learn interpersonal skills (peer relationships); and 5) Become aware of your own expectations for children.

"Despite the thousands of self-concept studies conducted with older students, there has been little research conducted with children younger than 10 years" (Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1991, p. 377). The importance of self-concept to present and future functioning has, however been well-documented throughout the literature (Coopersmith 1967; Harter, 1983; Harter, 1985; Jensen, 1983; Kostelnik Stein, & Whiren, 1988; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Parish & Parish 1983; Swayze, 1980).

Peer Relations

The potential role that children's peers play in their school adjustment is paramount (Ladd, 1990). "In addition to children's academic and career potential, early social adjustment in the peer group seems to predict adult social adjustment" (Rogers & Ross, 1986, p. 188). Because social development begins in the early years, it is appropriate for all early childhood programs to include regular assessment of children's social competence (McClellan & Katz, 1993).

Cohen, Pederson, Babijian, Izzo, and Trost (1973) determined that poor peer relationships in third grade were the best predictor of future emotional and mental health problems. Cunningham and Andrews (1988) found that children who were popular in their peer group were nominated as highly attached by their teachers. It is interesting that the reverse was found concerning peer rejection -- it correlated positively with teacher concern and rejection.

Making new friends in the classroom was associated with gains in school performance; and early peer rejection forecasted less favorable school perceptions, higher levels of school avoidance, and lower performance levels over the school year (Patterson, Kupersmidt, & Griesler, 1990; Ladd, 1990). Children who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children and who cannot establish a

place for themselves in the peer culture are considered to be "at-risk" for school failure (Hartup, 1992; Schwartzberg, 1988). Schwartzberg (1988) reported that studies in which children were followed over time have indicated that approximately one-third of rejected children will be rejected five years later. Unpopular peers were less satisfied and lonelier. It should be noted, however; that children are often rejected as play partners because they have different goals (Schwartzberg, 1988).

When compared with unpopular peers, popular children have been found to be more adept at knowing how to initiate a friendship, communicating effectively, integrating themselves into group conversation, and knowing peer norms and values (Kurdek & Krile, 1982). Popular peers are viewed by peers as leaders. They know how to cooperate, readily offer assistance, and are adept at turn-taking (Coie and Dodge, 1988).

Today's parents and teachers tend to push their children to learn as much as they can earlier than ever (Isenberg, 1987). This pressure for early academic performance has been criticized by child development experts because of its lack of research support as well as potentially harmful affects concerning development (Elkind, 1986; Seefeld, 1985; Spodek, 1986). "Introducing formal

instruction too early also puts the child at social risk" (Elkind, 1986, p. 632). In terms of socialization, the danger of early instruction is that it can make children too dependent upon others for their sense of self-worth (Elkind, 1986). McClellan and Katz (1993) concluded:

> Finally, it is also important to keep in mind that children vary in social behavior for a variety of reasons. Research indicates that children have distinct personalities and temperaments from birth. In addition, nuclear and extended family relationships obviously affect social behavior. What is appropriate or effective social behavior in one culture may be less effective in another culture. Children from diverse cultural and family backgrounds thus may need help in bridging their differences and in finding ways to learn from and enjoy the company of one another. Teachers have the responsibility to be proactive rather than laissez faire in creating a classroom community that is open, honest, and accepting (p. 3).

Thus, one's perception of self does appear to be related to one's perception of how others perceive the self. In a previous study, Grymes and Lawler (1990) examined self-concept and peer status as a function of family structure. The sample included 92 children (50 males, 42 females) from

six different kindergarten classes in a mid-sized mid-south city. The Woolner Preschool Self-Concept Picture Test (WPSCPT, Woolner, 1966) was utilized to collect self-concept data from each child. Peer popularity was determined using a peer-nomination technique, and family structure information was collected from teachers.

Results indicated that the majority of the children exhibited a positive and consistent self-concept. Peer popularity ranged from isolate status to very popular (selected 8 times by classmates). Ten percent of the participants were isolates (N=9), 52% were "less popular peers" (N= 48), 30% were popular peers (N= 28), and 8% were nominated 6-8 times by peers, making them "most popular peers" (N= 8). In addition, analysis of variance procedures were used to determine differences in either self-concept or peer popularity when using family structure as the independent variable. Neither analysis suggested that family structure accounted for a significant amount of the variance (Grymes & Lawler, 1990).

This study examined kindergartner's self-concepts and in relationship to their perceptions of interactions with peers. While research findings consistently suggest that children with positive peer relations are more successful than children with less positive relations, few

investigations have addressed children's perceptions of their interactions with peers. Children were asked to identify whether or not they perceived themselves to be part of the group and whether or not they wanted to be part of the group. Responses were analyzed in relationship to the child's self-concept.

Methods

Sample

The data reported in this study represents two years of data that was collected as part of a three-year study of kindergartner's self-concept. The sample represented in this data consists of three hundred forty-five kindergarten children from kindergarten classes in a mid-sized mid-south city. All children from the district attend the same kindergarten center, so a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds was assured.

Measures

Self-concept data was collected using the WPSCPT (Woolner, 1966). The WPSCPT is a series of 20 line drawings, shown in pairs. Children as asked to point to the picture that the feel best depicts them, and then (from the same pair) choose the picture that represents what they would like to be. The drawing pairs are contrasts, such as dirty/clean, independent/dependent, and shares/does not

share. Self-concept is the match between how the child perceives him or herself and what the child would ideally like to be. High self concept was identified as having at least 80% match between perceived and ideal descriptions.

The second variable in the study was an individual item from the WPSCPT. One pair of the drawings depicts a child with a group of children, while the second depicts the child alone. The purpose of the item is to measure the child's perception of the his or her own peer status. Children could fall into one of four categories: 1) perceived accepted, wants to be accepted; 2) perceived accepted, wants to be rejected; 3) perceived rejected, wants to be accepted; or 4) perceived rejected, wants to be rejected.

Procedures

Teachers and children participated on voluntary basis. Teachers allowed examiners to come into the classroom and collect self-concept data using the Woolner Preschool Self-Concept Picture Test (WPSCPT, Woolner, 1966). The examiners were the first author and graduate students, all trained in administering the WPSCPT. Chi square procedures were then used to identify relations among the variables.

Results

Most of the sample were identified as children exhibiting high self-concepts (88.1%), while only 11.9% exhibited low self-concepts. The children typically perceived themselves as accepted by the group (82.9%) and even more children wanted to be accepted by the group (87.5%). A significant difference occurred when responses to the individual item were compared to self-concept. More children identified as low self-concept perceived themselves as rejected and fewer high self-concept children perceived themselves as rejected as would be expected; X^2 (1, N = 345) = 12.466, $p < .01$. The same finding was determined with the child's ideal peer status; X^2 (1, N = 345) = 3.856, $p < .05$.

Discussion

As expected, children with low self-concepts tended to perceive themselves as rejected by peers and children with high self-concepts tended to perceive themselves as accepted by peers. An unexpected finding; however, was that low self-concept children were more likely to desire to be rejected by their peers. As measured by the WPSCPT, the agreement of perceived and desired self-concept determined the overall self-concept of each child. Interestingly, children with low self-concepts were more likely to score agreement of perceived and desired rejection (by peers) on

this particular item. In addition, although this item is one of ten items on the WPSCPT, the agreement of perceived and desired acceptance or rejection by peers contributed to each child's overall self-concept.

Similar to previous findings of Grymes and Lawler (1990), the majority of kindergartners in this study exhibited high self-concepts. Due to the fact that the data were gathered during the second semester of the school year, children's self-concepts and perceptions of peer interactions may have been influenced by various factors; including the curriculum. For the most part, kindergarten curricula emphasize positive social/emotional development.

Congruent with Hartup (1992), Damon and Hart (1982), and Kostelnik, Stein, and Whiren (1988), it appears that self-concept affected children's descriptions and perceptions of their interactions with peers.

Further study is necessary to determine the accuracy of children's perceptions in accordance with peer nominations (status). Further study is also necessary in terms of examining changes in self-concept and perceptions throughout the kindergarten school year.

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